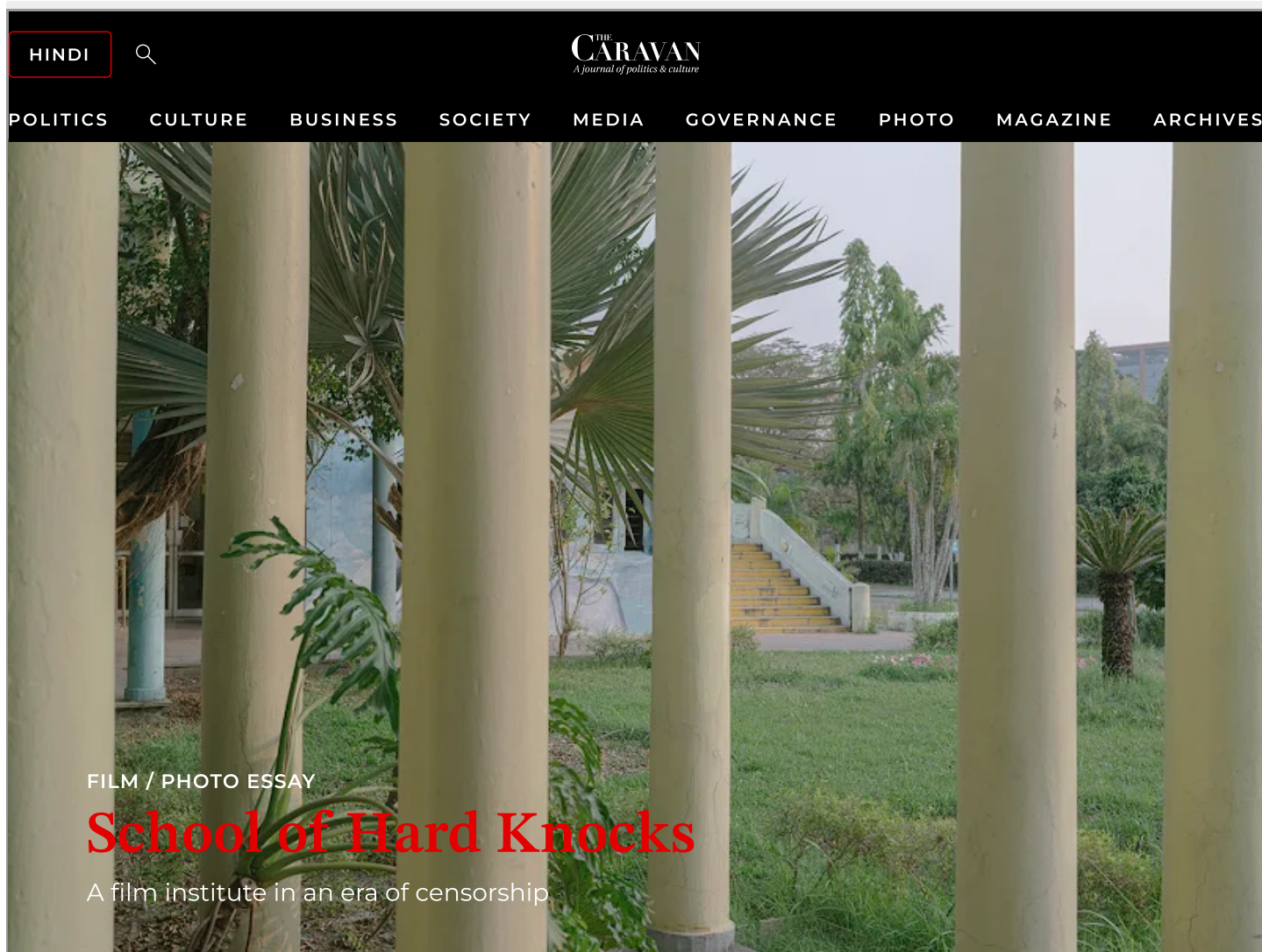




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School of Hard Knocks

A film institute in an era of censorship

Campus columns frame a green space. Designed by the modernist architect Raj Rewal, the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute campus reflects a spatial philosophy centered on circulation, encounter and collective life.

TEXT BY HIRAL TRIVEDI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GABRIELE CECCONI

30 April, 2026

Among the first educational institutions to come under attack from the Narendra Modi government, after it first came to power in 2014, were those that taught film. Filmmakers, film students and film institutions in India were quickly made aware of the ways that the state can impose surveillance and censorship. In 2015, the television actor Gajendra Chauhan, a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party, was appointed the president of Pune's prestigious Film and Television Institute of India. Chauhan's appointment was met with strong resistance by the students, who boycotted their classes and went on an indefinite strike. The FTII student body called Chauhan's appointment "political" and questioned his credibility to lead their institute. It was soon clear that his appointment was only a taste of what might lie ahead.

Screening films, otherwise an ordinary activity, was to be met with bans and violent disruptions. That same year, members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad violently interrupted a scheduled screening of the filmmaker Nakul Singh Sawhney's documentary *Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai*, which showed the complicity of BJP leaders in the communal violence in the titular region in Uttar Pradesh. The ABVP, the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, featured in many such shutdowns over the coming years. In 2018, the FTII

administration cancelled the screening of a student film on Kabir Kala Manch, a cultural group popular for using music and poetry to spread anti-caste messages. One of the makers of the film had been the leader of the student body during the 2015 protests. The FTII administration claimed the students had not obtained permission for the screening, but the students accused it of having succumbed to pressure from the ABVP. The student body said the ABVP had termed the film's content as "*Maovadi*"—Maoist.





Film reels archived on shelves. Despite the shift to digital, analogue film remains a reference point in Indian film education, preserving a tactile connection to cinematic history.

Incidents of censorship have become commonplace. In 2024, film students from the KR Narayanan National Institute of Visual Science and Arts in Kerala organised a public screening of *Ram Ke Naam*, a 1992 documentary on the demolition of the Babri Masjid. A right-wing mob reportedly interrupted the screening and threatened the students with violence. In February this year, the short film *Da'lit Kids*, made by Appu Soman, a student at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, was removed from the Animela Animation Film Festival line-up a day before its Mumbai screening, after the union ministry of information and broadcasting reportedly denied the usual student-film exemption without providing a written reason. In 2023, students at the SRFTI had staged protests when the government appointed the Malayalam actor and BJP leader Suresh Gopi as the institute's president. In a public statement, the students raised concerns over Gopi's "association with Hindutva political ideologies and his alignment with the

Bharatiya Janata Party” and how it might “compromise the principles of neutrality and artistic freedom” at their college.

These disquieting times are shaping aspiring filmmakers, their work and artistic agency. The documentary photographer Gabriele Cecconi attempted to interrogate this tension through his project, *New Cinema Kolkata*, which focusses on the SRFTI. Cecconi spent time with the students, in the spaces where they learn: the institution, the buildings, inside the classrooms and outside, with faculty, friends and others. “I wanted to reflect not only on the needs of young people, but more broadly on their aspirations, ambitions and dreams, and on how they must constantly negotiate with the political realities of the present,” he told me. “What emerged quite clearly is that, even if not always explicit, there is a broader climate of political and ideological pressure that inevitably influences the creative process.”

Exchanges with the students gave Cecconi “a deeper understanding of the environment in which these young filmmakers are working, an environment where creativity, aspiration, and political context are deeply intertwined,” he said. The role of censorship and the way it can be used to reinforce certain ideological positions were recurring concerns in his discussions with students. “Some students shared with me their desire to make films that they are already aware might be considered sensitive or controversial within the current political context. This creates a sense of uncertainty about the future of their work, whether these films will be able to circulate, be distributed, or even be publicly shown,” he said. “One student, for example, spoke about cultural practices from his home region of Kerala, where eating meat is common, and how even representing such everyday realities can become problematic within a broader ideological framework influenced by Bharatiya Janata Party and the promotion of Hindu nationalist values,” Cecconi said.



Founded in 1995 by the union government and named after a renowned filmmaker, the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute stands as one of the country's leading centres for film education, functioning not only as a place of learning but also as a space where artistic and professional identities are formed.

When censorship becomes systemic and institutionalised, it gives rise to self-censorship, Cecconi said. “There is a risk that students may begin to limit

themselves from the outset, adjusting their themes, subjects, or narratives in order to avoid potential obstacles. This concern was not expressed only by students, but also by some members of the faculty, who described how ideological pressure can shape creative choices, sometimes discouraging more critical or sensitive forms of storytelling.” Cecconi said that some professors at the SRFTI “expressed concerns about the limits of what can be openly said or taught, as speaking too freely may carry professional risks.” But the faculty exhibited resilience, too. “What I also found particularly significant is that, within the institute itself, many professors are actively trying to preserve a space for critical thinking and intellectual freedom,” Cecconi said. “This tension, between the desire to maintain an open, critical environment and the fear of potential consequences, was clearly perceptible and adds another layer of complexity to the institution.”



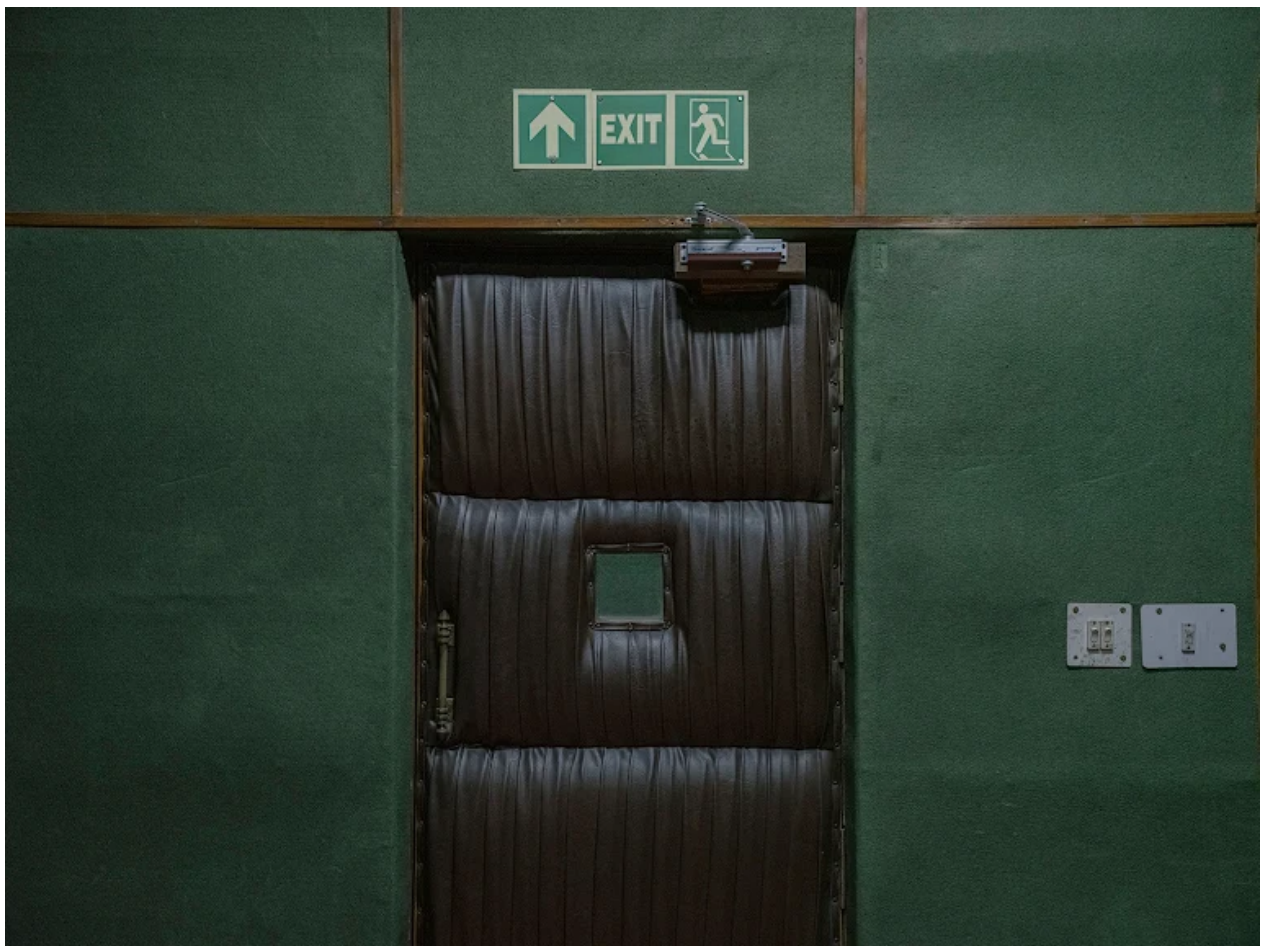
Historical sound and editing equipment displayed in the museum testify to the technological evolution of Indian cinema, from celluloid to digital workflows.



An industrial space within the campus that houses part of the electrical systems essential to the institute's functioning.



An empty soundstage, currently under maintenance, among scaffolding and stacked scenography.



Inside the sound department, a padded door beneath an emergency exit sign marks the entrance to a controlled acoustic space. Designed to isolate sound from the outside world, these environments reflect the precision required in audio work—where silence, as much as sound, becomes a fundamental element in the construction of cinematic meaning.



A statue of BR Ambedkar stands at the centre of the courtyard. The architect of the Constitution and a symbol of social justice for India's oppressed groups, the statue is a reminder of the political dimension of film, especially debates on the depiction of social inequity—or lack thereof—as well as representation and equality in filmmaking.



Students sit on the grass discussing ideas during a lesson. Open discussion is central to education, but contemporary political tensions have made critical discourse within public institutions more sensitive.



Two school technicians talk during their shift in a room housing part of the institute's electrical systems, an often invisible operational core of the campus. These backstage infrastructures sustain the entire filmmaking process, much like the technical crews whose work has historically remained behind the scenes in Indian cinema while enabling its production.



A student works on post-production in a soundproof editing room.



A student waits for classmates during the filming of an exercise.

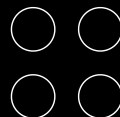


Students gather for a screening of their films. Collective viewing has long been a cornerstone of film culture in India, from film societies to contemporary festivals.

[Film Industry](#)
[Film and Television Institute of India](#)
[Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute](#)
[ABVP](#)
[Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad](#)

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